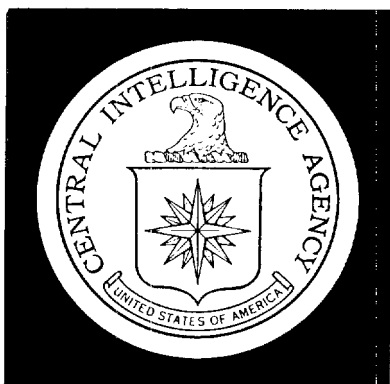


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CAMBODIA: Controversy over Lon Nol continues.

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CAMBODIA: THERE IS NO SIGN OF ANY EARLY RESOLUTION OF THE CONTROVERSY OVER LON NOL'S LEADERSHIP, ALTHOUGH TENSIONS APPEAR TO HAVE SUBSIDED SOMEWHAT IN THE PAST WEEK.

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SIRIK MATAK REAFFIRMED HIS CONCERN OVER THE PRIME MINISTER'S ERRATIC HANDLING OF MILITARY AFFAIRS TO THE US AMBASSADOR DURING A CONVERSATION ON 15 DECEMBER. MATAK ALSO AGAIN STATED THAT WHILE LON NOL HAS GAINED IN PHYSICAL STRENGTH, HIS MENTAL CONDITION HAS DETERIORATED. HE STRESSED THAT HE DOUBTS THAT ANY LONG-TERM COMPROMISE CAN BE WORKED OUT WITH LON NOL, AND THAT THE PRESENT POLITICAL IMPASSE CAN ONLY BE RESOLVED BY LON NOL'S RETIREMENT.

AT THE SAME TIME, HOWEVER, MATAK GAVE NO INDICATION THAT HE OR OTHERS ARE NOW READY TO PRESS THEIR DISAGREEMENTS--OR THAT HE HIMSELF INTENDS TO QUIT THE GOVERNMENT. FROM THE TENOR OF HIS REMARKS, MATAK CLEARLY FEELS CAUGHT BETWEEN LOYALTY TO THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE NECESSITY TO CONVINCE LON NOL THAT IT IS IN THE COUNTRY'S BEST INTERESTS FOR HIM TO STEP ASIDE. AS A MEASURE OF HIS RESIGNATION AND FRUSTRATION, MATAK AT ONE POINT STATED THAT HE IS "PERHAPS THE MOST UNFORTUNATE MAN IN THE REPUBLIC."

SOME KHMER KROM COMMANDERS HAVE JOINED IN THE CHORUS OF CRITICISM OF LON NOL. THESE OFFICERS, HERETOFORE AMONG LON NOL'S STAUNCHEST SUPPORTERS, REPORTEDLY ARE BITTER OVER HIS DIRECTION OF THE CHENLA II OPERATION AND THE GOVERNMENT'S FAILURE TO TAKE MORE EFFECTIVE ACTION AGAINST ENEMY FORCES WEST OF PHNOM PENH.

THUS FAR, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT THE KHMER KROM ARE SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP. THEIR DISENCHANTMENT WITH LON NOL, HOWEVER, ADDS YET ANOTHER UNCERTAINTY TO AN ALREADY UNCERTAIN POLITICAL SITUATION.

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